APPENDIX IV

Presidential Address by Dr. P. C. Chunder

Mr. Governor, Mr. Education Minister of Maharashtra, Distinguished Members, Ladies and Gentlemen,

This is the first occasion when I have the honour of presiding over the deliberations of the Indian Historical Records Commission and I consider it a privilege to be here to meet the learned members of the Commission assembled in this historic city of Aurangabad. This, incidentally, is the fourth time that this august body is meeting in Maharashtra region, and about the historical records of this region Sir Jadunath aptly remarked that 'in no other province of India have we this wealth of materials'. The city of Aurangabad too, and the adjoining areas around it, are rich in their historical associations. It is in the fitness of things that the Maharashtra Archives decided to open one regional centre here.

The main archival wealth of the region, however, lies in Poona, where the Peshwa's Daftar is of great interest to students of history. With its voluminous collection of lakhs of state papers and documents in Modi script pertaining to the Maratha period, Peshwa's Daftar has been rightly called the 'store-house of Maratha History'. It is the best source material for the study of political, social and economic history of the time.

Historical records serve a purpose when put to systematic and proper use. Preservation only is not enough. Since these records are mainly in Modi, proper and suitable finding aids and reference media in our working language or languages have to be prepared to enable scholars to utilise this information. The need for a sufficient number of Modi knowing archivists and scholars is evident, and while talking of this, I would plead for similar arrangements to be made in various parts of the country for learning and promotion of various other old scripts, which are becoming extinct. This august body had, as long back as 1966, at its 37th Session at Delhi, emphasised the need for listing of such records, and I am glad to note that substantial head-way has been made in some of our State Archives and also at the National Archives of India. But with all this, I am convinced that the work deserves a much greater impetus and drive. How this is to be achieved, it is for those associated with the Commission and the administrators concerned to decide. Perhaps discussion in details between them will help in arriving at some suitable solution. This region can boast of the valuable work done in this direction by some of the learned societies and institutions, like Bharatiya Itihasa Samshodhaka Mandala, Poona, Rajwade Samshodhan Mandir, Dhulia and the Historical Museum and Library at Satara founded by D. B. Parasnis.

The next question which requires attention is the need for specially designed buildings for storage of records. Archives cannot work efficiently in make-shift accommodation. I am glad to learn that several State Governments are becoming conscious of this fact and some of them, including

Maharashtra, are planning construction of new buildings or enlargement of their existing repositories. Since archives require comparatively smaller funds, postponing their development would mean little economy. On the contrary, it would lead to irreparable loss of precious records. I hope all the State Governments would give due priority to storage and conservation of archives.

With the question of constructing archival buildings is linked the issue of establishment of the record centres to serve as intermediate repositories to house semi-current records till such time as they are appraised and made finally ready for their transfer to the Central repository. It might sound staggering to those not conversant with the magnitude of the problem, that an estimate made about 20 years back revealed that if all the records were actually transferred to the National Archives of India, the storage space presently available would have to be enlarged a dozen times. The position today must be much worse. The problem of winnowing the great mass of chaff for the small residue of useful material has to be tackled scientifically, and the only way of preventing the National Archives from being deluged with the growing mass of records is to establish full-fledged record centres in different parts of the country. These record centres necessarily have to be self-sufficient in every respect, including facilities for repair and reprography. I am glad to note that a Record Centre of the National Archives has been opened at Jaipur and that a few States have also established similar intermediate repositories. I would suggest that other State Governments may emulate their action, and, if possible, take similar measures with regard to the district records as well.

The problem posed by public records does not begin and end with the mere raising up of sufficient number of functionally designed buildings to house them. Equally important are the questions of their proper management and up-keep at every stage of their life-span, their systematic review to strip them of their ephemeral components, and finally, their retirement to the archival repositories for permanent custody and utilisation. It is hardly necessary for me to emphasise before the learned members that timely weeding of ephemeral records is not only vital to administrative efficiency, but is also the basic need of research if the scholars are not to get lost in a mountain of records, although I agree that this measure has to be undertaken very cautiously, otherwise one may be accused of imposing one's sense of values on future generations.

Another interesting aspect of the problem brought out by a study undertaken recently revealed that the bulk of unappraised semi-current records up to the close of 1975-76 stood at nearly 2 crore files, including 25 lakhs of non-current records. Mere storage of these records in the metropolitan cities costs rupee 1 per file per year. Therefore, unless a major effort is made to weed out the large proportion of ephemeral records among these files, the Government will continue to spend large amounts of money on their storage alone.

The only logical way to solve these problems is to evolve an effective uniform control over the entire field of record management in all public offices. For the Union records the National Archives has already initiated a well-articulated Record Management Programme, but this certainly has

to be expanded considerably to cope with the ever-increasing growth of government records. Pending the enactment of a comprehensive law on Public records, the Government of India, as you are well aware, had issued in December, 1972, an Archival Policy Resolution covering the entire gamut of archives administration. But our experience during the last few years has confirmed that an Archival Policy Resolution is no substitute for an Archival Law, as the former lacks the statutory obligation. A Draft Bill on Public Archives, applicable to Union Government and such State Governments as would opt to come within its purview, was accordingly framed by the National Archives and is under active consideration of the Government of India.

Closely connected with Record Management is the demand for training of personnel in the field of archival administration. There is need to increase the number and professional competence of the persons handling records to cope with the challenge. Efforts have to be made to place every Record Room of the Union and State Ministries and Departments under the charge of a competent and duly trained Departmental Record Officer. The only facility existing so far for the purpose was the One Year-Diploma Course in Archives-Keeping conducted by the National Archives. This has been supplemented by introducing in service short-term courses for the benefit of those already on the staff of the Departmental Record Rooms of the Union Ministries and the State Archives Offices. With no special staff or independent accommodation for the purpose, the annual outturn was naturally inadequate. You would be glad to know that a full-fledged Institute of Archival Training under the aegis of the National Archives of India has now been set up. The Institute has also introduced a 'Correspondence course' for the benefit of those who cannot be away from their respective places for a long time. It is hoped that the output of the Institute would increase, and the long-felt need to provide sufficient number of trained archivists would be met. It is heartening to note that the course run by the National Archives attracts students not only from India but also from our neighbouring countries, and Africa too!

This august body has played a dynamic role in promoting archival development and historical research in the country, and its recommendations have also always received serious attention of the Government and other public institutions. Unfortunately, the limited resources of the country have come in the way of achieving in full many of its objects. The need for more funds for the development of archives is obvious. To ensure speedy development, a number of such schemes in the past were included in the plan schemes at the Centre As for the States, in accordance with the recommendations of the Commission itself, several State Governments have included development of archives in their respective plans. I would urge all concerned to draw up comprehensive plans for the development of archives, both at the Centre and in the States. Such development plans, to my mind, may include: suitable buildings for housing records, acquisition of records of permanent value after weeding the ephemeral ones, acquisition of papers of historical value in the possession of private institutions and individuals in India and abroad, preservation of the material acquired on scientific lines, facilities for photo-duplication, and provision of adequate finding aids and research facilities.

This brings me to another important point which relates to access to the Public records. To my mind, the best method of making people aware of the importance of our national heritage as preserved in the Archives is to encourage researches and studies based on archival material. The Commission, had, on numerous occasions in the past, emphasised the need for liberalising the rules regarding access to the records by the scholars. In our country records more than 30 years old are generally open for research. But there are many restrictions even in respect of 'open' records. The situation certainly deserves a review. It may not be out of place to mention here that in U.S.A. the Freedom of Information Act permits scholars to call for any document, even of a very recent date, and excepting for a few exceptional circumstances e.g. infringement of national defence and foreign policy secrets etc., the information required is not normally denied. The Law, however, applies to the Executive Branch of the Government and is not designed to cover congressional and judiciary proceedings. With a view to bringing archives nearer to the public, I would once again like to suggest an objective review in this regard.

So far we have concentrated all our thoughts on Public records. Equally pressing, and perhaps demanding equal attention, is the question of papers of historical value with private institutions and individuals. This problem has been discussed repeatedly in the Commission meetings. Private Archives comprise materials of wide variety, such as records of business concerns, banking houses, industrial organisations, educational, religious and philanthropic institutions, etc., besides the personal papers of eminent personalities in all walks of life. Among institutional papers, one often comes across diaries, correspondence of personal nature with friends and relatives and notes and memoranda kept for personal use. The problem with regard to this vast mass of papers in private custody is, undoubtedly, of a great magnitude, for such records are far more liable to neglect, decay and destruction, and very little is known about their location and their state of preservation. At the same time, their importance as an independent source material of history, for correcting the imbalance depicted in the official view-point as reflected in the Government records, is today increasingly realised by the historians. In order to compile data about these records, the National Archives has been collecting information with regard to this category of records under the National Register Scheme. I trust you will fully agree with me that such a major project would work successfully only with the active help and cooperation of the Regional Records Survey Committees and the State Archives. True, the States might be having their own difficulties, and finance may be the main stumbling block in the way, but it should be our constant endeavour to impress on the States the need of salvaging and preserving this rich heritage for future generations. You would recall that at the last meeting of the officers dealing with the National Register of Private Records, we had conveyed to you the Government of India's approval to set up a Central Government Unit in one of the States. A decision has since been taken to locate this Central Cell in Orissa which will work in close collaboration with the Regional Records Survey Committee and the Archives Office in the State. I only hope that the plan scheme regarding 'Expansion of the National Register of Private Records' would get further impetus from the Government and more such aid would be thus available to reinforce the work in various States in this direction.

While we are all proud of our rich archival heritage and expertise, we are also eager to collaborate closely with our neighbours to exchange ideas with other historians and archivists on common problems. A number of cultural agreements concluded by the Government of India with several countries include cooperation in the field of archives. I am sure you will be glad to know that with this aim of mutual cooperation and promotion of archival interests in the region, a Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives for South and West Asia covering the countries from Bangladesh and Bhutan in the East to Iran in the West has been established in December, 1976 with its secretariat at the National Archives of India. I am confident that promotion of such professional contacts would not only prove mutually advantageous, but would also go a long way in preserving our old records which are a part of cultural heritage of all mankind.

Thank you all for a patient hearing.

Dr. S. N. Prasad, Secretary,
Indian Historical Records Commission.